

Interview with Benjamin Morris

Benjamin Morris, a native of Mississippi, is the author of numerous works of poetry and fiction, and has received such awards as a fellowship from the Mississippi Arts Commission and a residency from A Studio in the Woods. He lives in New Orleans.

Tulane Review: *What do you think about the New Orleans literary community and how it fits in with the rest of contemporary literature?*

Benjamin Morris: In a word, intimate. The New Orleans literary community is one of the most knowledgeable and supportive communities in which I've ever worked. Everyone knows everyone (a truth characteristic of New Orleans in general, but never more true here), everyone praises and encourages each other's efforts, the profusion of venues and styles and genres all across the city ensures that no one here will ever feel aesthetically lonely, and the citywide desire for talent and innovation is as true with poets and writers as it is with all our other forms of artists. Part of this, it must be said, stems from It—we lived through It together, we came back from It together, and we read or write (or don't) about It together even now. It may be over in one sense, but we'll keep telling Its stories until we can't hold a pen any longer—It is a part of us, and we a part of It, and that sense of bonding has created some truly wonderful and beautiful relationships. As Brad Richard noted in an essay for the New Orleans Review last year, and John Biguenet again for Poets and Writers online, we're as resilient as we've ever been—if not moreso.

In one sense, I think we in New Orleans fit in on one level simply because we're still here – because we survived, and have thrived, and continue to make new work, we won't ever need to seek any kind of outside cultural credibility ever again. Rather, we're now in the position to where we're exporting that work to other places, we've reestablished our cultural legitimacy in such a way—namely, the hard way—that national and international audiences are even more intrigued to see and hear what's coming out of the city. (Now what kind of stories are they going to tell?, they ask) More importantly, we're able to view ourselves in a new light, and recognize that our work is up to those national and international standards—this is why, over the course of the coming year, a small group of poets and writers here in town are working to establish a New Orleans chapter of PEN—to bring even more exposure

and awareness to the issues and facing not just writers in New Orleans but across the South. New Orleans is a thrilling place to work, as attuned to new ideas and experimentation—what the essayist C.W. Cannon calls ‘cultural miscegenation’—as ever. It’s my belief that our experience over the past seven years reaffirms that.

TR: *How did your residency at A Studio in the Woods change how you think about poetry? About how you write? (If it did at all). Why do you think that is the case?*

BM: I don’t know that it changed my conception of poetry, either artistically, in terms of the work of a single poem, or culturally, in terms of poetry’s place in the broader aesthetic and political landscapes around us. I’d been writing seriously for over a decade by the time I went in to the Studio, so my ideas of what poems and poetry can do were fairly well-developed by that point. The collection I began at the Studio, a book exploring the ecological community of the bottomland hardwood forest, has proved to be something of a departure for my work—unlike the more lyrical tradition in which I’d previously been working, it owes as much to the botany of Charles Allen as it does to the poetry of David Harsent—but that was probably to be expected. One should never write the same book twice.

That said, I did feel the immense reassurance while at A Studio in the Woods that poetry here in New Orleans, like theatre and music and the culinary arts, could enjoy an institutional home outside either universities (the classic place to find poets at work) or the places of its performance: open-mics, coffee shops, slam nights, cabaret shows, and the like. To be able to practice in a place which recognized poetry as an art as central and vibrant as any other was one of the chief blessings of being at the Studio. Poets often, in this culture (American culture, unlike many other cultures around the world), have to fight for their relevance, and even when it’s achieved the gains never seem to last for very long. Hence the need to make the most of those opportunities when they come; certainly I tried to do just that—both for the sake of poetry, as an art form, and the poem, the individual piece of work itself.

TR: *If you could spend time writing anywhere in the world, where would it be and why?*

BM: If you’re asking where I’d like to travel, then the answer is simple: everywhere! I have a day job as an academic geographer, and few things excite me more than packing a suitcase and traveling to a new place. Honestly, I’ll

write anywhere, with pleasure: in bed, in the shower, in the car (I'm worried it's going to cause an accident one day, but there are some long, level stretches of highway in Mississippi, where I'm from, that are just perfect for sonnets—I keep a notebook in my glove-box just in case), or on a boarding pass or restaurant bill or grocery store receipt. I'm slightly embarrassed to say that I've had to write in the backs of other poets' books when I couldn't find any paper—to any other poets out there, I promise: it's not personal, it's just business.

But my favorite spot, above all, has to be the public library, no matter which one or where it's found. Public libraries are one of our greatest institutions, and writers and poets have a responsibility to take care of them—by using them—in return for all the ways that they take care of us: by housing our books, offering us work space, hosting events, nurturing a reading culture, encouraging young people to be readers and not watchers, and, in many cases, comprising a chief portion of our readership. Most of the work in most of the books I've been working on over the past year was written at one of many different branches of the New Orleans Public Library or the Hattiesburg Public Library, and the same will remain true of my books to come. The accounts of our indebtedness to these institutions extend indefinitely, and there's no better way that I have found—with one exception—to honor that than by making full use of them whenever and wherever possible. Drop me off in the middle of a new city, and I'll find its public library by sundown. It's a matter of survival.

TR: *What do you look for when you are writing a poem: a voice? A line? An idea? Or does it just emerge onto the paper?*

BM: The simplest way to answer the question is to say that each one differs in its form of arrival, which is why I try to remain open and attentive to the prospect. It can be a challenge, in this age of professionalized, personalized distractions, to keep those antennae tuned – but I do try. We have to. As John Besh once said of cooking – if I can't make a good gumbo, who will? Going out in search of a poem is a dicey proposition – it's possible to try too hard to write a poem, to go bag it like you would a trophy buck, but that's the surest way for it to hear you coming and clear the county line as fast as possible. And then there you are in the forest, hungry and frustrated, and suddenly it's getting dark.

No, I honestly believe you have to be humble, and grateful, and receptive in a way that honors the moment—not that lords it over the page in triumph. This belief stems in part from our political situation, of course—poets and writers in this country, unlike so many others, have the freedom to work,

and it's this sense of perspective that keeps me ever grateful and determined to make the most of that time. When at work, I go in search of the clearest and most precise articulation of what must be said, often working through multiple—sometimes dozens—drafts to find it. A good poem must offer the reader, poet included, some understanding, sentiment, insight, or vision that they did not share before: the world must be fundamentally different by the end of a poem, either in writing it or in reading it (or performing it). If it is not, what, I ask, is the point? Do we write to tell ourselves what we already know? Were that the case, I'd have been a weatherman—after all, the weather is always going to be something, we just don't know exactly what.

I always look for a point in my poems—a reason for being. Otherwise, the work isn't a poem. It's something else. The point should strike the reader as would the point of a spear, inviting its way into one's exposed side. If there's no point, either in subject matter or in execution, then my interest level wanes, often immediately. It's a standard to which I hold my own work as that of other poets—bad work, no matter whose desk it pollutes, is still bad work. Hence the desire to go in search of the good: the necessary, the meaningful, the startling, the exact. The poems that, once you've read them, you can't remember your life beforehand with any clarity, or, granting that, any fondness.

TR: How have you changed as a writer over the past few years (if you think you have) and where do you see yourself going/how do you see yourself evolving (if you think you can predict that)?

BM: I revise more than I used to. After receiving a grant from the Mississippi Arts Commission a few years ago, I felt the best way to honor that opportunity was to take the time to truly hone my craft—to work not just more but harder, not to rest on any laurels (the surest way to crush them) but to go in more dedicated pursuit of the individual poem. So, several years ago, the number of revisions in my work jumped over a mile. It's felt good. You know with more certainty that a poem is done, and you reach its hard, diamond-like core with greater precision and confidence. My lower back may hurt more from the hours at the desk, but I train at the gym to counteract that.

That's one thing. I'm trying to read more, too—not just in poetry, but in more subject areas. Not for material for poems (remember, that buck will hear you stomping through the woods long before you ever even see it) but for personal education—for ideas for travel, for assignments, for knowledge of other cultures, for all the reasons that reading brings us such joy. Books on my nightstand lately include those by Christian Wiman, Liao Yiwu, Roger Deakin, Jesmyn Ward, and one of my favorite books of all time, *The*

Phantom Tollbooth in its new 50th anniversary edition (which I'm reading to my nephews). Again, it can be a challenge to make the time to do so, with all the pressures of modern life—and I do struggle with that—but it's no less important than it has ever been.

As for the future? It's difficult to say, and I don't like to predict. I leave that to the weathermen. I'd like to trust myself more, to approach the page not with cocksure arrogance but more with the ability of one who has trained, and continues to train, for such moments—like a surgeon, or an athlete, or an astronaut. To be able to work with humility and gratitude, the kind that allows you to explore and try new things, with no fear of adverse risk or failure. (Despite knowing that failure is critical to accomplishment, a truth understood by artists, designers, and engineers for centuries.) One should approach a poem like a lover—slightly in awe at the very opportunity to go to bed, but confident and inquisitive enough, willing always to listen and discover, that both lover and beloved are changed fundamentally by the experience—and desirous, past any obstacle that might come in between, to do so again.

It's a direction I hope to go in all my life.